Anthony T. Fiscella

FOLLOWER-POWER: A FOLLOWER-CENTRIC APPROACH TO THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP

Abstract

This article addresses the follower-centric examination of the social construction of prophetic leadership roles. My central questions are: In what ways can key follower figures potentially exert independent agency and influence within the charismatic relationship? And what role might they play in the establishment and maintenance of the social construction of prophetic leadership roles? To these ends, I assess the existing research in the area; I lift out relevant elements (such as the Swedish historian of religion Bengt Sundkler’s distinction between leader, nucleus, and mass); and I develop my own concepts of «first followers» and «follower-power». The latter of these I describe as seven functional roles, each with a corresponding power-type: «finders» (point-power), «devoters» (devotional power), «promoters» (storytelling power), «managers» (organizational power), «intermediaries» (intermediary power), «innovators» (creative power), and «supporters» (support-power). I develop these concepts through the examination of existing sources (i.e. the Bible, historical material, etc.) and ultimately conclude that, while the concepts seem to fit their purpose, too little research has been done in this area to make definitive remarks.

Key words: Social construction, religion, leadership, charisma, follower-centric, prophets

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to offer a heuristic theoretical set of tools to help analyze the social dynamics that create and maintain prophetic leadership roles. In their classic book *Sociological Theory*, Ritzer and Goodman (2003:129) describe Max Weber’s ideas on charisma and then observe: «What is crucial is the process by which such a leader is set apart from ordinary people». The focus of this paper is precisely that process. However, in contrast to many studies, my approach here is explicitly follower-centric and focuses primarily upon the social construction of the prophetic leadership role during the embryonic stage of a new religious movement. The question then, concerns not only the process of how ordinary people become transformed into prophets, but more specifically: What role might key follower figures play in that process and
what are the precise means by which those followers might potentially exert independent agency and influence within the charismatic relationship? The aim of this study then is to suggest a theoretical means of answering of those questions. I pursue this aim by developing theoretical concepts that fill in the apparent gaps left by previous research. Instead of examining a single case study, as has been done by others (see Bainbridge 1978; Wallis 1986), I examine a range of sociological studies as well as historical and religious sources in order to exemplify and develop the concepts at hand. Thus, while the theoretical tools in this study are specific in scope, the resource material is broad. Ultimately, implications of this study stretch beyond the boundaries of the social construction of charisma and reach into larger questions of how power, agency, and influence manifest between prophets and followers in newly formed religious movements.

Prior Research and Purpose of Study

There is no single way to approach the study of the charismatic relationship nor is there universal agreement as to what it means. The current lack of academic agreement regarding charisma stems in part from Weber’s own ambiguous remarks (see Conger and Kanungo 1987:638; Wallis 1986:129; Worsley 1968/1974:xvii) even if some (Waddell 1972) attribute this ambiguity in part to charisma’s paradoxical nature. Other scholars have similarly typologized research on charisma (DuPertius 1986:112-113; Furseth 2002:68-69; Steyrer 1998:808-810). I will attempt, as concisely as possible, to assess some of the main types of research in this area insofar as they pertain to the question at hand. I will do so by drawing a series of distinctions between seven different research dichotomies, briefly state why I choose the latter distinction in each case, and thereafter lift up the more relevant ideas and empirical studies.

Firstly, a distinction can be drawn between research which focuses on the personal qualities of the leader (Conger and Kanungo 1987) and that which focuses on charismatic leadership primarily as a social construction (Furseth 2002; Meindl 1995; Wallis 1986). While the former approach may have relevance in, for example, research about the improvement of leadership skills, only the latter approach can address the inherently social character of the constructed role of prophetic leadership.

Secondly, there is a distinction between research that poses psychological questions (Jacobs 1989:73-88; Sinha and Jackson 2006) versus research that poses sociological questions (Beyer 1999; Nelson 1987; Palmer 1996; Robbins 1998; Wright 1992). While the psychological perspective may be appropriate for answering why-oriented questions of motives, the sociological perspective is more appropriate to deal with the current issue at hand, namely the how-oriented question of the social construction of prophetic leadership roles.

Thirdly, there is a clear distinction between research that addresses charisma in organizational settings (Conger and Kanungo 1987; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Klein and House 1995) versus that which deals primarily with prophetic charisma (Wallis 1984; Wilson 1975). When checking their respective bibliographies one can observe
that these two fields seem to rarely overlap except for their common reference to Weber. The degree to which they are relevant to one another is perhaps questionable (see Sundkler 1948:149; Wilson 1975:8-9). Furthermore, I believe that there is a fundamental difference between the two realms that can be well-articulated by the application of Bruce Lincoln’s (2003:59) «minimalist-maximalist» ideal type dichotomy. In the minimalist model of culture, with which I would associate institutional charisma, economics is the central domain and religion is restricted to the private sphere. In the maximalist model of culture, with which I would associate prophetic charisma, religion is the central domain of culture and morality affects essentially all areas of life. As Eileen Barker (1993:182-183) has written: «A [prophetic] charismatic leader may be accorded the right to decide whom you marry…how you may cut your hair, what clothes you should wear…where, under what conditions, and perhaps even whether you should live. And all this may be changed at a moment’s notice.» Even if the two areas do occasionally overlap and/or blend, as organizations founded by people like L. Ron Hubbard and Lyndon LaRouche could demonstrate, the distinction between the two realms is as evident as the distinction between gesellschaft and gemeinschaft.

Fourthly, there is the distinction between leader-centric research (Beckford 1972; Palmer 1988; Turner 2003) and follower-centric research (Howell and Shamir 2005; Meindl et al. 1985). According to Meindl, the overwhelming majority of research, at least in organizational settings, has been leader-centric and all too little has focused on followers and their role in the charismatic process, hence the need for more follower-centric research (Meindl 1995:339).  

The fifth distinction is between research that views followers as passive (Howell and Shamir 2005; Lalich 2004) and research that is centered on, or at least includes, a view of followers as active agents (Coleman 2004; Johnson 1998; Nelson 1987; Richardson 1996). Some of this latter type of research has revolved around the passive or active choice to convert. For example, Warburg (2001:93) distinguishes between seekers and non-seekers and Stark (1996:99-100) distinguishes between primary converts (an active conversion process often undergone by the wife or master of the house) and secondary converts (a more passive conversion process often undergone by the husband, wife, or servants in the house) in early Christianity. A passive conception of followers might be more appropriate for a study of the impact that the charismatic relationship has upon followers yet, in the study at hand, it is necessary to consider followers as active agents if we are to examine the potential channels for their agency and the influence that could be exerted through those channels.

The sixth distinction is between research that deals with established prophetic leadership roles (i.e. post-routinization) and the relatively small amount of research that addresses the initial stages of a prophetic community (Alberoni 1984; Bainbridge 1978; Beckford 1972; Wallis 1986). Alberoni, for example, theorizes about what he refers to as the «nascent state» during the inception of a new movement while Bainbridge and Wallis provide empirical case studies of new religious movements in their initial stages. It is these studies of the latter approach that are of the most relevance if we are to set our gaze upon the actual moment of the creation of the prophetic role. The
difficulty here, of course, is the scarcity of reliable source material with regard to the embryonic stage of many religions.

The final distinction is between research that regards followers as a single mass (Howell and Shamir 2005) and those studies which, in one way or another, regard different types of followers as separate units. Several studies, for example, have separated converts (Kilbourne and Richardson 1988), apostates (Bromley 1998; Wright 1998), or women (Furseth 2001; Palmer 1996; Rose 1987; Wright 1992) as distinct categories of followers to be studied. More significantly, others have made distinctions on the basis of leadership or subleadership role (Horrell 1997; Theissen 1978) or between «short-term» and «long-term members» (Oakes 1997:126). There seems to be however an overwhelming tendency to either merely mention in passing or completely ignore the different positions of power amongst followers with regard to the social construction of prophetic leadership. Yet just as the positions of apostates or women are deserving of separate analysis so too is the explicitly separate analysis of specific key follower roles important to a follower-centric study of the social construction of prophetic leadership.

In other words, with regard to the seven distinctions, I am interested in pursuing sociological, follower-centric research regarding the construction and maintenance of prophetic leadership and the potential for followers to actively exert independent influence on that process primarily within the context of the initial stage of a religious movement. After reviewing prior research, it becomes apparent that very little work has been done so far in this very specific area. Part of the reason that it has been ignored is undoubtedly due to its counter-intuitive stance. By all appearances, the prophet seems to be the one who is making all decisions and exerting influence. Indeed, followers (and apostates) often willingly contribute to this view by downplaying their own role and influence, referring instead to the power (for better or worse) of the leader. In any case, the existing research seems to offer inadequate means of examining the potential channels whereby key follower figures might exert independent influence upon the charismatic process.

Nonetheless, it is possible to find in the prior research scattered bits and pieces of precursors to my concept of follower-power (even if they tend to be mentioned almost in passing). The concept of «subleader» in charismatic relationships is hardly new and finds its parallels in the following: «administrative staff» (Weber 1968:249); «charismatic aristocracy» (Weber 1968:119; Wallis 1986:151); «subordinate leaders» (Wallis 1986:144); «'cinder' subordinates» (Klein and House 1995:189); «chief disciples» (Johnson 1992:1); «managers» (Carter 1990:82), «inner circle» (Lalich 2004:79); and «dedicated elite» (Jacobsen and House 2001:79). My own term «first followers» has similar meaning to the term «core group» as applied by Wright (1992:38). Worsley (1968/1974:271) points to a follower-power when he talks of the «organizer» that is intimately connected to, but separate from, the role of the prophet and Barker (1993:197) refers to «mediators» in a manner that corresponds to my own concept of «intermediary».

Some of the most relevant empirical studies that demonstrate the extent to which followers can exert independent agency in the charismatic relationship are Bengt Sun-
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dkler’s (1948) empirical study Bantu Prophets in South Africa, Bromley and Shupe’s (1979) research on the Unification Church, William Sims Bainbridge’s (1978) study of the Process Church of the Final Judgment, and Roy Wallis’ (1986) examination of the origins of the prophetic leadership of Moses David Berg in the Children of God.

In Bantu Prophets in South Africa Bengt Sundkler (1948:139, 144-149) described the «three-sided interplay between leader, nucleus, and mass». The prophet is usually considered the central locus of power. The nucleus is then comprised of various «subleaders» who manifest the next immediate level in the official or unofficial hierarchy of power (Sundkler 1948:144). Lastly, the mass is made up of the larger group of followers each of whom has the least access to power. As Sundkler notes, this creates a special dynamic that can distinguish it from more secular organizational settings:

While the [institutional] leader thus influences his subordinates, and in various ways maintains his control over them, it is of course at the same time true that the [leadership] nucleus has a decided influence upon the leader. Especially is this the case when the leader is of the prophet type. As a prophet (as here described) he is more susceptible to outside influence than the chief. His authority rests on the claim that he has the Holy Spirit. But no less a claim is made by his subordinates. ...To retain his influence the prophet has then to follow the dreams [revelations] of his inspired subordinates, or to take the risk that they may establish a new Church without him (Sundkler 1948:149).

As we can see then, at least in the case of Sundkler’s empirical study, the nucleus of subleaders plays a key role in the charismatic relationship with the main basis of their power being the potential threat that they could abandon the prophet and establish a new church without him or her. Bromley and Shupe’s (1979:138-142) study suggests that this has been the case with Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s tolerance of «The Oakland Family» section of the Unification Church.

In their book «Moonies» in America, Bromley and Shupe apply a resource mobilization perspective to the Unification Church’s expansion into North America. Since this process was undertaken by subleaders and not Reverend Moon himself (who remained abroad during most of this initial period) we can see quite clearly the manifestation of follower-power at work. Most notably, Bromley and Shupe demonstrate that the subleaders in the United States innovated the group’s ideology (1979:65), theology (1979:76) and recruitment techniques (1979:74-75), and even went so far as to develop their own leadership structure as was the case with «The Oakland Family» (1979:140). In the case of the latter, the leader of the Oakland Family’s unswerving devotion to Reverend Moon was mirrored by Moon’s own remarkable tolerance for their deviation from the norm within the Unification Church.

In Satan’s Power, Bainbridge recounts his ethnographic study of the Process Church of the Final Judgment. This was a group that started out as a therapy service in the early 1960s by Robert and Mary Anne De Grimston two former members of the Church of Scientology. Together with the clients of their therapy, they quickly evolved into a social group and then a religious sect. Robert De Grimston, through his authorship of the group’s theological scripture, clearly filled the role of prophet. At various times, Bainbridge notes some key contributions made by first followers and sublead-
ers. We can see that various followers, at one point or another, wrote authoritative instructions for membership activities, designed the group’s logo, wrote songs, prophesized, and, amongst other things, helped steer official policy. Finally, in 1974, when the group was experiencing economic hardships, burn-out, and low morale in combination with a split between Mary Anne and Robert, the nucleus of subleaders simply expelled their prophet, abandoned his teachings, and continued without him (Bainbridge 1978:233-234).

In The Social Construction of Charisma Roy Wallis (1986) recounts the story of David Berg and the social construction of prophetic leadership that ultimately led to his transformation into Moses David, the spiritual and authoritative head of the Children of God (later renamed «The Family»). Briefly, David Berg grew up in a family of evangelists, became an evangelist himself as an adult, and held aspirations towards greater charismatic claims. These claims remained unsuccessful until 1968 when he managed to acquire a small following of young people in Huntington Beach, California. Though he was already married, Berg began making sexual advances towards some of the young women. Again he met with little success until his encounter with one purportedly plain young daughter of a minister who is known in the movement as «Maria». Their relationship was, however, much more than erotic. Maria was the first one to truly believe in Berg as a prophet. An early follower, in an interview with Wallis, described the relationship between the two:

The fascinating dynamic that developed between these two and the larger community of believers created a self-propelling snowball effect and it lifted Maria «from obscurity to a place of leadership» (Wallis 1986:138). The presence of Maria as a sexual partner to Berg also created the need to innovate their religious doctrine and thus their adulterous union became a symbol for a new order, divinely sanctioned, a «New Love» (Wallis 1986:138). Maria’s influence did not stop there. It was also she who introduced to Moses David Berg the experience of speaking in tongues.

There are also theoretical developments that are relevant to the subject at hand. Specifically, I am thinking of Meindl (1995; Meindl et al. 1985), Wilson (1975) and Worsley (1968/1974). According to Meindl, one of the ways in which followers construct leadership is by means of «social contagion». Here, the experience and attribution of charismatic leadership occurs by spreading from current followers to prospective followers much as a disease spreads from one person to another. Avolio and Gardner note that social contagion processes «may explain how attributions of charisma and their affects spread from followers who directly interact with the leader to others who have little or no direct contact» (Gardner and Avolio 1998:52).

As for Wilson, the term «charismatic demand» implies a social environment that has established a fertile soil for prospective prophets to lay root (Wilson 1975:82-92).
What is interesting about this approach is that it diverts attention away from the perceived agency of the leader and towards the agency of the social environment that led to that agency. Wilson’s depiction of charismatic demand virtually begs the imagery of a theater wherein the first crew of believers have made a script, constructed a stage, and thereafter proceed to search for someone who is willing to play the leading role of protagonist. Indeed, as Worsley’s study demonstrates, the role of prophet may be created and maintained in some cases without an apparent need for the physical presence of the leader at all.

Worsley speaks of how followers «in a dialectical way, create …leaders» by selecting them out (Worsley 1968/1974:xiv). The leaders themselves can be insignificant or even non-existent. He describes the various forms in which prophetic leadership strays from the traditional image of a strong ‘charismatic’ figure:

Far from being intensely focused on the person of the leader, then, we find movements which, empirically, are eminently millenarian, but in which the leader may be (a) absent; (b) not a single person at all, but with leadership divided amongst several people; (c) where the functions of prophet and organizer, at least, are separately embodied in two distinct persons; (d) where the leader is often one of a number of local leaders, rather than a single central figure (as Weber implies); (e) where the prophet is an insignificant person; (f) where the symbolic importance of the leader only becomes significant after his physical removal. …From this standpoint, all leadership, whatever the empirical facts, is primarily symbolic and relational, and only secondarily personal (Worsley 1968/1974: xvi-xvii).

If the prophetic leadership role becomes functionally irrelevant then the question arises as to who is actually running things, who is generating the image of the prophet, and how they are doing it.

Methodology and Material

The means by which I address these questions is by first constructing a theoretical set of tools that could conceivably help answer precisely these questions regarding the construction and maintenance of prophetic leadership roles and secondly by using those tools as a lens with which to examine existing material regarding the embryonic stages of religious movements.

The theoretical set of tools involves drawing distinctions between different types of follower roles as well as different types of channels whereby those roles may potentially exert their agency within the charismatic relationship. In other words, those follower positions which can be seen as playing key roles are theoretically isolated in order to be examined as distinct from the positions of either leaders or the general mass of followers. The material that I use to illustrate the applicability of the theoretical tools is a combination of existing sources in both religious narrative (such as the Bible) and historical documentation (such as Gershom Scholem’s study on Sabbatai Zevi).
First Followers as a Concept

In order to more clearly establish the distinctions between various follower roles I adopt Sundkler’s model here as a foundation from which to start. Out from his three basic categories of power (leader, nucleus, and mass) I focus on the nucleus of subleaders (as opposed to leaders or the mass of followers) and imagine different types of subleader roles that can arise in a prophetic context (see section on follower-power). Furthermore, I supplement Sundkler’s ideas with an additional category. Since the three categories that Sundkler mentions often do not exist during the initial phase of a religious movement, another concept is needed to describe pre-organizational follower roles. I dub this additional category: «first followers». First followers are those disciples who literally arrive first on the scene. They are, often together with the prophet, the original creators of the prophetic leadership role and the charismatic relationship.

First followers are contrasted by «latecomers», that is, disciples who arrive after the charismatic relationship has already been established. First followers, by rights of seniority, knowledge, and experience, have a greater chance of becoming a part of the nucleus when it forms. The ranks of the masses of followers are then filled with latecomers. It is not impossible, however, for a latecomer to enter the nucleus and become a subleader. Indeed, necessity often requires it. Some latecomers may even rise high in the hierarchy. Examples of latecomers rising to power can be seen in Bromley and Shupe’s (1979) study of the Unification Church’s expansion to the United States from its Korean homeland. Similarly, the status of first follower does not necessarily guarantee the disciple a subleadership position.

As to be expected, religious accounts invariably portray the role of first followers as decidedly subordinate to that of the religious founder. The basic theme of the religious narrative virtually demands it. Still, the fact that certain individuals are credited with being the first followers and that these individuals are portrayed as having performed significant roles suggests that there may be more to it. Often the first followers are named. Muhammad had Khadijah (his wife); Buddha had Kaundinya (a former friend and fellow seeker); Moses had Aaron (his brother); and, according to Matthew, Jesus had Peter and Andrew (presumably strangers to Jesus). The actual historical influence that these first followers may have had upon prophetic charisma opens the door to such research with regard to more contemporary religious movements.

First Followers as Dominant Figures

In order to underline the powerful role that first followers can potentially play in the development of a new religious movement, I shall briefly review three historical figures: ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad Adam, the hermit of Niklashausen, and Nathan of Gaza. In the first case the prophet was Muhammad Ahmad of Sudan. He became
known as the head of the Mahdist movement which briefly turned Sudan into an Islamist state in the late 1800s. His brand of Islam was unconventional in that it placed his own person in a central role as Mahdi. According to John Hunwick (1987), the whole idea of Ahmad being the messiah came not from Ahmad himself but from a Sufi disciple named ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad Adam (Abdullahi). It was Abdullahi who first told Ahmad that he was the long-awaited Mahdi. Hunwick writes:

> Up to this point there is no indication that Muhammad Ahmad had considered the possibility that he might be the Mahdi... Even now he hesitated, but following a series of visions he became convinced in 1881 that God had designated him as the Mahdi (Hunwick 1987:147).

Abdullahi was known for being a magnificent organizer and military strategist. When Ahmad died it was Abdullahi who took over and steered the Islamist regime until its eventual defeat at the hands of British and Egyptian forces. Here we can see that the first follower seems to have converted the prophet rather than the other way around and it was this same individual who later took over the mantle of leadership when the prophet died.

Another example is centered around the charismatic leadership of Hans Böhm, the drummer boy who became the prophet of Niklashausen in 1476 only to be burned at the stake for heresy later that year. What is interesting about his case here is that young Böhm has been described as a puppet who was shrewdly exploited by two local men, a priest and a hermit. Norman Cohn (1970) writes:

> This hermit seems to have exercised a total domination over Böhm, intimidating and inspiring him. Even the vision of the Virgin was said by some to have been a trick devised by him to deceive the young shepherd. It was also said that when Böhm addressed the crowds from a window the hermit stood behind him and prompted him (Cohn 1970:232-233).

Here, it is very clear that historians are telling us that the real power lay not in the hands of the prophet but in the hands of his first followers. Whether or not this is an accurate historical portrayal may be disputed but the story does a good job of illustrating how much power one can imagine a first follower to have when non-believers are telling the story.

Similarly, the story of Sabbatai Zevi, as told by the renowned Jewish historical scholar Gershom Scholem (1973), describes a rather mishap prophet. He is insecure, unsure, and prone to depression and doubt. The year is 1665 and Zevi is troubled. He goes down to Palestine and seeks answers from the prophet, Nathan of Gaza. According to Scholem, Nathan declares Zevi to be the messiah and, like the story of Ahmad, Zevi has his doubts but eventually accepts the title and his prophetic career is launched. The movement gained widespread support across Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean but largely ended when Zevi converted to Islam under threat of execution. Nathan is not only presented here as someone who may have exerted a great deal of influence over the messiah Zevi, but he is seen by Scholem as the real «charismatic» force in their prophetic cooperation and a crucial factor in the movement (Scholem 1973:207-208).
Scholem writes that Nathan had «all the qualities which one misses in Sabbatai Zevi: tireless activity, originality in theological thought, and abundant productive power and literary ability» (Scholem 1955:295-296). That is, he had all the potential for «charisma» that he himself placed upon Zevi. Scholem sums up Nathan’s role in the movement as akin to both that of John the Baptist and that of St. Paul. He blazes the trail for Sabbatai Zevi but is also the leading theologian of the movement. Perhaps, most significantly, «Nathan does not himself practice antinomianism; he interprets it» (Scholem 1955:296). Although Nathan may not have been the very first follower of Zevi, he is regarded by Scholem as the pivotal figure whose belief converted not only Zevi but also many thousands of other Jews to believe in Zevi’s messianic role.

In all three cases above we can see that the distinction between leader and follower becomes quite murky when the claim is mounted that the first follower is acting as a puppeteer or the driving force behind the scenes. Where then is the locus of power? My contention is that the concepts of first follower and subleader may be helpful in pinpointing the locus of power and the follower role that can exert or share that power with the prophet. Still, if we are to fully understand the mechanisms by which that power is exerted or shared then there remains a need to examine the channels of the potential agency of both first followers and subleaders.

Follower-Power

In order to be able to better explain the above cases, the exertion or sharing of power by subleaders and first followers, and the charismatic process in general, I have conceived of the notion of specific functional roles and «follower-power». If subleaders and first followers are the actual agents of the potential exercise of influence then the roles are the specific form of that agency and follower-power constitutes the channel whereby that agency is able to manifest.

These roles with their corresponding power-type are as follows: 1) Finders: point-power; 2) Devoters: devotional power; 3) Promoters: storytelling power; 4) Managers: organizational power; 5) Intermediaries: intermediary power; 6) Innovators: creative power; and 7) Supporters: support-power.

First come the finders. With their power to point they effectively aim the social spotlight on the prophetic leader. As we have seen earlier, this recognition can occur with or without the would-be founder’s own claim to prophetic authority. Though anybody can employ the power to point, finders are the ones who point first and/or have the most initial success. Usually they have some sort of elevated religious or social status in order for the spotlight of their revelation to bear any significance to onlookers. The higher the status, the brighter the light. Yet fame is not necessary. One very powerful finder in history is known as Mullá Husayn who had searched and searched until he literally found the founder of what came to be known as the Bábi movement which, in turn, ultimately led to the founding of the Baha’i Faith (Afnan 2004). As Lindskoug (1979:64) notes, a typical feature of prophetic leadership is the
designation of epithets such as «Master», «Savior» and so on. Finders are those who first bring such terms into use.

While a leader can be a role model for followers in terms of any other behavior, only a follower can demonstrate to another follower what it means to be a disciple and how that role shall be performed. Only a follower can choose to bow down before the leader or pray in the name of the prophet. As Bromley and Shupe (1979:194) note: «The most effective means of integrating members into a communal group is to provide a clearly defined role into which the individual can move and begin acting immediately». In this sense the leader is helpless to set an example. Similarly, a leader may be able to say «I am a prophet» yet since the role of prophet only exists when it is socially recognized, there must exist a first follower –with considerable power– who dares to step forth before anyone else and convincingly state: «That person is a prophet». For every founder there is at least one finder.

This power to point may be given a significant boost if it is accompanied by another: devotional power. The power of devotion involves a person’s ability to 1) change their lives in an extraordinary manner (not necessarily ascetically) and 2) perform their role as devoter well and convincingly. For example, to hop up and down like a puppy in front of the new Messiah could prove to be more of a nuisance than a service. Even if it were to constitute a dramatic change in lifestyle it would hardly be helpful to the prophetic career of the would-be leader. One is reminded of the story of the servant girl who followed Paul and Timothy around shouting loudly «These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation» (Acts 16:17). Finally, after several days of her shouting, Paul got annoyed and told her to shut up. Supposedly, Paul had other reasons for doing so, but, had she more tact as a devoter, he might have been compelled to accept her and her behavior could have helped set a standard for other potential followers. Common expressions of devotional power are ‘cleaning up’ one’s life, quitting bad habits, turning a new leaf, and then giving credit to the prophet. The best devoters often go down in history as saints.

Promoters contribute to a movement or leader by presenting a storyline that has a good chance of appealing to the target audience. Storytelling is the task of mythmaking. Figuratively speaking, these followers are the writers, reporters, and journalists of a movement. Conscious or not, each storyteller leaves their personal imprint on the story that they present. Most powerful are those individuals who finally put the words to script and succeed in having their text preserved for generations to come. When it prevails through the ages, the written word, even if it is a mere reflection of an oral tradition, has an authority and dominance that far surpasses that of its oral counterparts. Paul, as a man who both described history and wrote it down in his letters to the early Christian communities, exercised perhaps more influence through his storytelling power than through his role as an early leader of the first Christian communities. One aspect of storytelling is the spreading of small pieces of news or tales that, in themselves, help project a prophetic image of the leader or the group in general (Piff 1998). This can be as informal as a parent telling their child a casual story about the prophet before bedtime or as ritualized as Mormon testimonies before the congregation. As Bromley and Shupe (1979:176-177) observed, a key strategy to gain converts for the
Unification Church was the personal testimonies of members with regard to the grand impact that the church had had on their lives.

Managers exercise organizational power quite simply by organizing, delegating, planning, administering, communicating, and otherwise running an organization in ways that the charismatic leader may either not be able to or not want to. Managers can operate behind the scenes or share the limelight with the charismatic leader while performing more worldly, political functions. As noted earlier, Worsley sees an intimate connection between manager and prophet. In the case of the Mahdi movement of Sudan, Abdullahi seemed to have contributed a good deal through his organizational power.

Intermediary power is the power accorded those who are in the lofty position of presenting the prophet to other followers, potential converts, and/or the masses. The importance of the intermediary function is underscored by a story from the Digambara Jain tradition wherein the founder of Jainism, Mahavira, is to deliver his first sermon. It is in a great mythological setting, preaching before many gods and animals. He declines, however, to speak because of the lack of disciples (ganadhharas), whose function is to interpret and mediate to other people the divine sound (divyadhvani) which the Digambaras claim emanate from Mahavira’s body when he preaches and which would otherwise be unintelligible (Dundas 1992: 32-33). The fact that gods had lined up to hear him preach was insufficient. It would not win him any converts. Ultimately, he finds his solution in the person of Indrabhuti Gautama who, after being won over by Mahavira, becomes his devotee and intermediary. Nathan of Gaza is portrayed by Scholem as having exerted a considerable amount of intermediary power and one of the most well-known intermediaries in recent times is Malcolm X who gained international prominence as spokesperson for the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

An allegorical example of intermediary power is provided in the Old Testament. When God first handed Moses the task of leading the Israelites from their persecution, Moses was doubtful. God showed him how to work signs of wonder but Moses still didn’t feel that his message would be heeded especially since he was «slow of speech» (Exodus 4:10). God sternly reassured Moses that he could turn to his elder brother Aaron: «He shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him» (Exodus 4:16). Moses does as he is told and finally meets Aaron in the wilderness. In the end, it was Aaron, the first follower, who delivered the mighty message from God:

Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. The people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped (Exodus 4:28-31).

Here, the first follower is shown to be as one who plays a very active leadership role and actually compensates for the doubts and/or inadequacies of the prophet. Whether or not first followers use these channels such as intermediary power in order to consciously exert their own independent agency upon the leadership does not affect the fact that these channels may exist and thereby are open to that possibility.
Innovators influence the prophetic leader and/or the group in general by introducing new ideas, concepts, practices, or revelations. The unknown Rastafari who first started wearing dreadlocks will probably never be named but the creative power of Bob Marley helped spread Marley’s own vision of Rastafarianism across the world. Another example of creative power is Maria’s introduction of glossolalia to Berg and thereby into the Family’s general practice. The hermit of Niklashausen is accused of being the creative powerhouse behind the young drummer’s success. The creation of a charismatic demand, that is, contributing to the arousal of expectations of a coming messiah, can also be considered the handicraft of innovators. Again, we can turn to the allegorical descriptions of religious narratives to illustrate how a charismatic expectation may arise independent of the influence of the prophet in question. Muhammad, Buddha, Jesus, and Moses are all described as having had someone else foresee their greatness. Muhammad had the Christian monk Bahira who foresaw his greatness while he was an adult; Buddha had Asita, the sage; Jesus had Simeon, the holy man; and Moses was foreseen by members of his family to be the savior of Israel. In the case of the latter three, the vision was revealed when the prophets were infants. What is interesting here is not the question of the authenticity of the prophecies but the fact that the very concept of foretelling speaks of an agency that goes beyond the scope of the individual prophet. The dynamics of expectations that are created by prophecy help establish an environment wherein a prophet is virtually forced to arise due to the powerful expectations by a community of believers. The expectations can be placed on a particular person (as they were with J. Krishnamurti) or they can be placed upon a general messianic role (as in Judaism).

Less apparent to observers are often the supporters who manifest support-power in subtle yet significant manners such as financing or lending legitimacy to the movement. This is a more passive mode of follower-power which suggests that a follower has some sort of social, institutional, or economic status which can be of use to the prophetic leader. The support can involve a single element (i.e. money) or it can be a mixture of various elements (i.e. money, knowledge, social standing, political leverage, etc.). For example, Helena Blavatsky co-founder of the Theosophical Society, for all of her purported charisma, may have been lost in the sands of history if it had not been for her alliance with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, a successful lawyer and journalist with a high degree of support-power. Similarly if, say, a celebrity such as Madonna or John Travolta displays an interest in a certain religious group they, intentionally or not, draw the media spotlight toward the group in question. The power to direct the focus of the media spotlight is a manifestation of the support-power inherent in their position as celebrities. The distinction between point-power here and support-power is that the finder is the one who discovers a prophet while the supporter, in this case, is merely choosing to aid a prophet who has already been established.

With the thought of little old ladies sending in their life’s savings to televangelists, this passive form of follower-power may easily conjure the image of a religious leader manipulating his or her followers. Manipulation and exploitation may or may not be the case, but the purpose of mentioning support here as a form of follower-power is to highlight the fact that it need not always be the case. In fact, support-power may also
appear together with other follower-power types. In the case of the MOVE Organization, for example, the first follower Donald Glassey filled three key functional roles at once: finder, intermediary, and supporter. He was the first to recognize MOVE founder John Africa as a prophet; he was the first intermediary between the prophet and the first followers; and he exerted support-power by lending his college education, status, money, living quarters, and writing skills to the uneducated and virtually illiterate prophet-to-be then known as Vincent Leaphart (Fiscella 2005:85-89).

The seven follower-power types and corresponding roles that I have outlined above are, at this stage, theoretical sketches. What is most important here is that they allude to specific channels of potential influence that can be exerted upon the charismatic relationship by those in subordinate leadership positions. They help establish a sociological lens whereby we can better grasp key follower roles and the functions of those roles rather than lend undue attention to the personalities or specific traits of the individuals who fill those roles. The actors who fill these roles may shift but the positions that are filled remain. In this sense, each follower-power type and role constitutes an opportunity to exert independent agency. Yet not only do all types of follower-power constitute opportunities to exert some degree of influence in the movement once a higher position in the hierarchy has been attained, they may even constitute the means whereby a particular disciple acquires that position. In this sense, the independent exercise of follower-power is an option for all followers, even if the potential to exert any significant degree of influence is usually reserved for either first followers or subleaders. Also, the roles need not be rigidly attached to the agents that occupy those roles. In the same way that an ordinary person can perform various roles in life such as friend, counselor, or partner, a single disciple can occupy several functional roles at once (role sets) or may gradually shift from performing primarily one role to another (role transit). And just as an ordinary group of people may perform a single task such as a team of managers, a single role may be performed by several followers (shared role). Some of these functions (i.e. organizational, etc.) may be performed, at least in part, by the leader; some of them (i.e. intermediary, etc.) may only be performed by a follower; some of them (i.e. innovative, etc.) they may even be performed by an outsider to the organization; and some of them (i.e. storytelling, etc.) may need to be performed by nearly all members including the larger mass of followers.

Although I’m primarily dealing with the roles that are present during the initial inception of a religious movement, most, if not all, of these roles and types of follower-power continue to be relevant even after the group has established itself. These roles can, in fact, be viewed as incubators for nascent leadership. Certain groups seem to even foster the development of leadership qualities and charisma amongst their following (see Palmer and Bird 1992; DuPertius 1986). Other leaders, in «weak» positions may be compelled by circumstance to engage in forms of «collaborative leadership» (see Wallace 1993). If, in any of these cases, followers are in fact exerting independent influence upon the construction and maintenance of prophetic leadership, then hopefully the concepts of subleaders, first followers, and follower-power can be helpful in its analysis.
Conclusions

In this brief study I have raised the question of the ways in which key follower figures might potentially exert independent agency and influence within the charismatic relationship as well as the roles that they can play in the establishment and maintenance of the social construction of prophetic leadership. I surveyed the existing research with regard to the social construction of prophetic leadership roles and found that there seems to be a lack of an explicitly follower-centric set of theoretical tools with which to examine the specific means by which first followers and subleaders can influence the charismatic relationship. Certain theories, however, were found to be at least somewhat relevant to such a follower-centric approach, namely, Bengt Sundkler’s (1948) three-party interaction of leader, nucleus, and mass, James R. Meindl’s (1995; Meindl et al.1985) pioneer work in follower-centric theories (specifically his concept of «social contagion»), Bryan Wilson’s (1975) concept of «charismatic demand» and Worsley’s (1968/1974) work which markedly downplays the role of the prophet.

Subsequently, I have explored the potential implications of those theories by presenting seven different functional roles and forms of follower-power that either subleaders or first followers may pursue as a means to exert their agency on the process of constructing and maintaining prophetic leadership roles. Again those terms are: «finders» (point-power), «devoters» (devotional power), «promoters» (storytelling power), «managers» (organizational power), «intermediaries» (intermediary power), «innovators» (creative power), and «supporters» (support-power).

There are a wide range of factors which naturally play into the development of prophetic leadership (such as the peculiar traits of the central actors, socio-psychological factors, economic factors, the visionary message, social climate, etc.) and I have intentionally ignored all of them in order to be able to focus on one single aspect of the process: the manifestation of follower-power in the construction of the prophetic leadership role. Ultimately, my conclusion is that the concepts of «first followers», «subleaders» and «follower-power» are applicable to the better understanding of the establishment and maintenance of prophetic leadership. Furthermore, these concepts suggest that there do in fact exist channels whereby followers may potentially exert a degree of independent influence in their positions as key follower figures. However, it should be noted that this is only a small foray into the arena of follower-centric studies of prophetic charisma. No definitive remarks can be made at this stage and there is much more potential for future research.

The heuristic nature of this limited study has demanded a preliminary disregard for historicity in favor of theoretical development. Hence, a more in-depth study could engage in cross-referencing and empirical analysis as well as apply a more critical analysis to source material and/or refine (or revise) the theoretical tools. Furthermore, one could apply follower-power theory in other related areas such as the study of women’s roles in new religious movements or the routinization of charisma. It could be applied to help explain why certain prophets «fail» or why certain movements succeed after the death of their founder. Follower-power theory could also be used in
conjunction with other theories such as social exchange, resource mobilization, sequence analysis, dramaturgical approaches, symbolic interactionism, or discourse analysis in order to help shed light on some of the origins, causes, and structures of new religions. In any case, the soil seems amply fertile in this field of research. And the time seems ripe to plough.

Sluttnoter

1 In fact, the very term “follower-centric” seems to be more closely tied to the research on charisma in organizational settings than religious settings. For example, a recent search on Google for any document that contained both “follower-centric” and “charisma” turned up 78 documents (many in reference directly to Meindl and none with regard to the sociology of religion). The same search with “social construction”, “charisma”, and “NRM” found 716 documents (most of which were related to the sociology of religion). A Google search of “follower-centric” and “NRM” yielded no results whatsoever.

References


Anthony T. Fiscella: Follower-power: A follower-centric approach


